Phillips Community: A Case Study

Phillips Community is located along SC Highway 41, in an unincorporated area of Charleston County just northwest of Mt. Pleasant. The community began in 1878 when ten-acre parcels of land from Phillips Plantation were "sold to the Negroes" for $63.00. To these new freedmen, $63.00 was a princely sum. Extant plats and maps verify the sale, timeframe, and boundaries of the land transfer. The fact that descendants of the original purchasers have held on to the land for well over 100 years, signifies the depth of family connection and commitment to the land and is a tribute to their once enslaved ancestors.

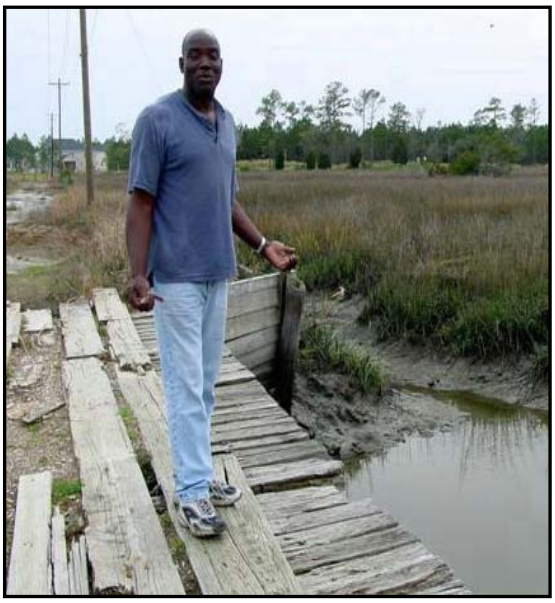
Phillips Plantation, once part of Laurel Hill and Boone Hall Plantations, was the first plantation owned by Dr. John Rutledge, who came to South Carolina from Ulster, Ireland. Rutledge married Sarah Boone Hext, and acquired the land that became Phillips Plantation through the marriage. Rutledge sons John and Edward gained national prominence as delegates to the First and Second Continental Congresses and later as governors of South Carolina. John was a signer of the Constitution and became the second Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Edward is known as the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Today, as it has been for more than a century, Phillips is a small, rural Gullah/Geechee community that still occupies the footprint of the original settlement. Land owners in the area are descendants of the freedmen who purchased the land more than 125 years ago. Since families never thought it necessary to subdivide land and have individual ownership, land was shared among family members. As family groups have grown, the land has been shared to form family compounds. Because much of the land was not formally transferred by wills and registered deeds, most of the community land base has become a classic example of "heirs' property."

Rev. Henry Palmer, Sr., tends the goats and hogs in his yard. Although surrounded by surburban development, Phillips is still rural.

Benj. Bennett
Co. A. 128, U. S. C. I.

Phillips is currently bordered on all sides by upscale residential development. Parker Island, location of their traditional cemetery, has been reborn as River Town Country Club. Graves have been vandalized and many grave markers have been stolen. Elders in the Phillips community remember when there were many stones, but as of this writing, there are but four remaining grave stones, all dating to the 19th Century, one of which is for Benjamin Bennett, a veteran of the United States Colored Infantry during the Civil War. Currently, there is no protection for this cemetery. It lays in the rear of some subdivision lots where it is inaccessible to descendants and unprotected from further vandalism.



Richard Habersham stands on the bridge that once connected Phillips to Parker Island

A logging bridge once existed between Phillips and Parker Island. The bridge was not only a link to the cemetery, but also a neighborhood gathering place where people swam, fished, caught crabs, and socialized. Once construction of the River Town Golf Club was completed, contractors bulldozed the bridge access on the Parker Island side and destroyed the cultural link which had existed for many generations. Not only have Phillips residents lost their path to Parker Island, but they have also lost their neighborhood gathering place. Chemical runoff from the golf course has had a serious impact on the marshes and waters of Horlbeck Creek. The fish and crabs are no longer abundant. Fiddler crabs, though plentiful on the Phillips side, decline in number and disappear entirely as one approaches the golf links.

A grassroots organization led by Richard Habersham has been gathering historical data, holding meetings, and trying to work within the system to save the community. They learned early on that traditional historic preservation laws such as the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 do not readily apply to communities like Phillips or Scanlonville because there are no valuable physical structures left to preserve or restore. The possibility of a successful nomination as a site of traditional activities — as provided for in the National Register program – is remote. Even places of traditional cultural expression like the Parker Island Bridge, described above, have been compromised by the impacts of real estate development. The most valuable "cultural resource" in these places is strong family connection to the land, a link that has existed for more than 125 years. Such stories of cultural loss have been repeated again and again in Gullah/Geechee communities throughout the study area. Ironically, for this "living culture" it might ultimately be only the "dead culture" of the archaeological remains of grandparents' houses that qualify for National Register listing.

Now an even greater threat looms over this historic neighborhood. Plans are under way to widen South Carolina Highway 41 which runs through the Phillips Community. The road widening project has been designed to reduce traffic congestion caused by the development of nearby upscale subdivisions. Although other options may be available, the path of least resistance seems to be through this historically black village. Dr. John Rutledge's brick tomb lies hidden from public view, adjacent to Hwy. 41 in the Phillips Community and would be lost in the road widening project. Phillips residents see this tomb and the Rutledge connection to Phillips as a part of their own history. Another piece of their story may soon be lost. If, however, the Town of Mt. Pleasant chooses to use federal funds for this road project, there still may be hope for saving culturally important sites.

Tomb of Dr. John Rutledge
SC Hwy. 41, Phillips Community

Gullah/Geechee Revitalization

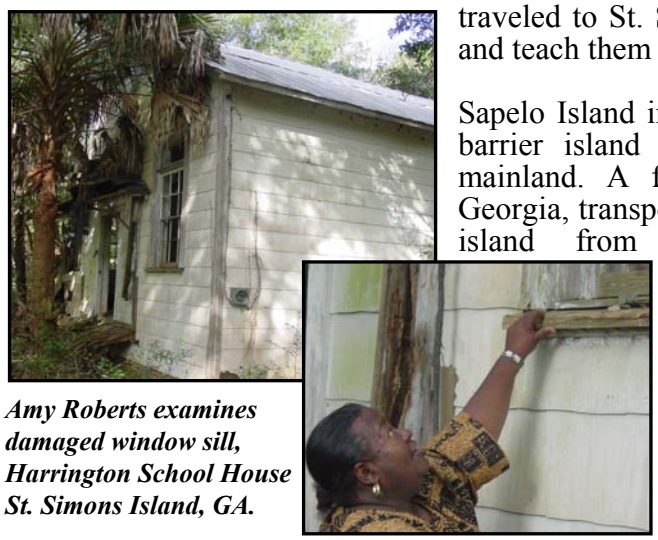
When societies come under stress from war, rapid economic change, population losses, and political oppression, in order to survive frequently undergo what anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace (1970) calls "revitalization processes" of socio-cultural change. Oftentimes these processes take various forms of "nativism," described by an earlier anthropological theorist, Ralph Linton (1943). Nativism includes not only "nativistic movements," such as the 19th Century Ghost Dances of the Plains Indians or the Cargo Cults of Melanesia, but also other less obvious forms of "nativism" evidenced in, for example, "the Englishman's insistence on dressing for dinner even when alone in a remote outpost of empire" (237). In Linton's scheme, nativism can assume many forms, which may be analyzed as various combinations of the "magical" and "rational," "the perpetuative" and "revivalistic." In the model developed by Wallace, revitalization movements depend upon a consciously conceived effort by charismatic leaders to conceptualize a new goal culture, convert followers to this vision, and attempt to establish a new "steady state" of social "equilibrium."

These concepts and models of revitalization and nativism have special relevance for understanding what Gullah/Geechee people are doing today to grapple with the increasing forces of modernization, urbanization, and globalization that endanger their collective cultural memory and their traditional social identities and skills. In their struggles, Gullah/Geechee people confront the specific problems of local communities and in their cultural world at large — sometimes stretching far beyond the Carolina/Georgia coast.

Meeting of St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition (SSAAHC), First African Baptist

Gullah/Geechee people are pursuing many approaches to cultural survival. A number of communities have organized festivals and other fundraisers to support cultural education and historic preservation movements to rescue and restore significant buildings. Amy Roberts and the St. Simons African American Heritage Coalition (SSAAHC), a 501(c)(3) non-profit established in 2000, are working not only to teach children about their culture, but also are trying to save the historically black Harrington school building on the island. In the spring of 2002 SSAAHC launched a land retention initiative; owners placed bright yellow signs on their property declaring, "Don't Ask – Won't Sell." Fundraising activities – from weekly barbecues to an annual Georgia Sea Island Festival -- have helped in their efforts. The Trust for Public Land is now working with SSAAHC to assist in the acquisition of Harrington School.

A key part of SSAAHC's purpose has been to teach the area young people about their rich heritage so that they will take pride in their Gullah/Geechee culture. To this end, the group sponsors bus trips to culturally significant sites such as Penn Center, Seabrook Village, and American Beach. As part of this project Vera Manigault of Mt. Pleasant, SC,



Amy Roberts examines damaged window sill, Harrington School House St. Simons Island, GA.

traveled to St. Simon's Island to demonstrate her craft and teach them basic basketry skills.

Sapelo Island in McIntosh County, Georgia, is a large barrier island with no bridge connecting it to the mainland. A ferry boat, operated by the State of Georgia, transports people and supplies to and from the island from a dock in Meridian, Georgia. Approximately 96% of Sapelo land is owned by the state. Hog Hammock Community, one of the last intact Gullah/Geechee island communities along the Georgia coast, originated ca.1834 as one of several slave settlements on the island. In 1965, Richard J. Reynolds, Jr., largest landowner on the island, consolidated the remaining settlements, including Raccoon Bluff, Lumber Landing, Belle Marsh, Hanging Bull, and Shell Hammock into the Hog Hammock area. Hog Hammock residents, who are direct descendants of Africans brought to Sapelo in the early 1800's and freedmen who purchased property after the Civil War, have held on to their land for over 130 years. The community includes approximately 434 acres of land located in the south-central area of Sapelo Island.

The Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society (SICARS) was founded in 1993, incorporated in 1994, and achieved 501(c)(3) non-profit status in 1995. The organization's mission is to "address systemic threats to the survival of the community through land retention strategies, land use planning, and policy reform. These threats include tax and government planning agendas that directly affect our community and encourage or directly create the loss of descendant-owned land." Believing that the Sapelo Island community "…can take ownership and responsibility for our future only to the extent that we can develop an accountable, representative, and well-informed leadership," SICARS has taken political action to halt further land losses through public education on heirs' property, land retention, tax reforms, and zoning laws (SICARS home page).

First African-Baptist Church, Raccoon Bluff, Sapelo Island, GA, has been restored with assistance from SICARS, SCAD, and Georgia DNR. The church is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

SICARS sponsors, organizes, and promotes heritage/cultural tourism events such as the annual Cultural Day Festival to teach both Gullah/Geechee people and outsiders about the richness of Gullah/Geechee culture and to raise funds for community projects. SICARS with the assistance of the Savannah School of Arts and Design (SCAD) and the Georgia State Preservation Division of the Department of Natural Resources, restored the First African Baptist Church building at the historic Sapelo Island settlement site known as "Raccoon Bluff."

Children play on the grounds of Farmers' Alliance Hall, which serves as the backdrop for Cultural Day on Sapelo Island.

SICARS has recently received a Georgia Heritage grant to develop a restoration plan for Farmers' Alliance Hall. Farmers' Alliance Hall was built in 1929 by the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union. The main floor was historically used as a brokering agency for local Geechee farmers, while the second floor was the local Masonic Hall and meeting place for the Order of Eastern Star. Today the Farmers' Alliance Building serves as the backdrop for entertainment at the annual Sapelo Cultural Day festival. Ray Crook, who has spent a number of years working on the Gullah/Geechee archaeology of Sapelo Island (2001), collaborated with local Geechee historian Cornelia Bailey to record oral histories and traditions of elders from Hog Hammock Community. The proceeds from the resulting publication are dedicated to toward the restoration of Farmers' Alliance Hall (Crook et al. 2003). Long-term plans include creation and construction of a living history village project on acreage near Raccoon Bluff. SICARS is also seeking funding to purchase its own ferry boat to transport residents and visitors to and from Sapelo.

SSAAHC and SICARS are but two of many similar grassroots community groups along the Gullah/Geechee coast. Working in concert with non-profit organization such as the South Carolina Bar Foundation and the Penn Center, local community organizations throughout the study area are fighting to keep their traditional homelands from being overrun by suburban sprawl. These groups seek to heighten awareness of heirs' property problems and educate their people about conditions that make traditional communal land ownership unworkable today.

By far the most dramatic and visible movement – locally, nationally, internationally – to effect Gullah/Geechee cultural revitalization region-wide is the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition. (Goodwine 2000) Founded in 1996 in Brooklyn, New York, by Marquetta L. Goodwine, a native of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, the Gullah/Geechee Coalition, is described by director Goodwine as a community-based organization that "promotes and participates in the preservation of Gullah and Geechee history, heritage, culture, and language; works toward Sea Island land re-acquisition and maintenance; and celebrates Gullah/Geechee culture through artistic and educational means electronically and via 'grassroots scholarship'" (Goodwine, Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition home page).

Goodwine and the Coalition worked with the Beaufort County Planning Commission to establish specific zoning protection for Gullah lands by establishing a "cultural protection overlay district." As of this writing, Beaufort County is believed to be the only county in the United States to have specific laws to protect Gullah culture. The laws establish a cultural protection overlay (CPO) District "to preserve traditional land use patterns and to retain established customs and rural way of life." (Beaufort County Planning Department, Electronic document 1) In additional to the CPO, the laws provide protection for family compounds, lands that have remained within a family for a period of 50 years or more, "to allow longtime rural residents to protect a traditional way of life and provide affordable housing for family members which in turn will help stabilize and preserve the county's rural communities." Owners of such family compounds, working within the prescribed guidelines, are granted density bonuses that allow for traditional clustering of family residences (Beaufort County Planning Department, Electronic document 2).

In addition to leading the practical efforts of the Coalition, Goodwine proselytizes for an almost quasi-transcendental achievement of cultural solidarity, consolidation of Gullah/Geechee ethnic identity, and even "nationhood" of Gullah and Geechee people throughout the Low Country and Sea Islands. For her efforts, according to Goodwine, some of her followers "enstooled" her in 2001 as "Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation." As Queen, Goodwine leads an effort to win eventual reparations for past wrongs to Gullah/Geechee people, with the funds to be managed by her and the "Council of Elders" of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (Goodwine, 2002; cf. Kly 1994a, 1994b).

Marquetta L. Goodwine, Founder
Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition

Goodwine's more far-reaching efforts have all the earmarks of the classic revitalization movements described by anthropologists for indigenous peoples and others whose cultural identity and way of life is threatened. Strictly speaking, Gullah/Geechee people are not indigenous to North America. The point may be made, however, that despite ancestral roots in Africa, "Gullah" or "Geechee" developed in America as a distinct "creole" society. In this respect, Gullah/Geechee language and culture could be said to be "indigenous" to the Low Country and the Sea Islands. Whether or not they are "indigenous," Gullah/Geechee people presumably are covered by the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities," as Goodwine (1998) has suggested.

As with charismatic leaders of revitalization movements throughout history, Goodwine attracts followers with near religious fervor while repelling others who disdain her movement with equally strong sentiments – including some Gullah/Geechee people themselves. Some people grant unwavering loyalty to Goodwine's political and cultural legitimacy and view her as a true savior of her people; others dismiss her as a self-serving opportunist. Some change their minds.

From small-scaled localized efforts at saving historic buildings to the more sweeping vision of Queen Quet, much that Gullah Geechee people do today can be comprehended within a framework of ideas discussed by renowned anthropologist Wolf under the rubric of "peoplehood" (see also Deloria 1969). Peoples disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed by the expansion of nation-states, colonial empires, and industrial economies

> … arise and define themselves as against others also engaged in the process of development and self-definition. There is hardly a study of an ethnic group now that does not describe how the locals use "agency" to "construct themselves" in relation to power and interest. This is…much to the good. It transcends the bland, power-irrelevant relativism of much of the talk about "culture" (Wolf 1994:6).

Conditions along the Gullah/Geechee coast at the beginning of the 21st Century are ripe for the classic processes of cultural revitalization and affirmations of "peoplehood." Tourism, rapid economic development, land losses, and dwindling community autonomy are major stresses. Added to these is a decline in traditional sources of income from fishing, lumbering, and agriculture. These multiple stressors from many directions place Gullah/Geechee people in an at-risk condition which Faulkenberry, *et. al*. (2000) described as a culture of servitude. To quote from the Faulkenberry et al. article:

> Sam Vaughn, a white business owner, echoed a deep concern for the future, shared by many residents: 'We've got a whole culture...of servitude [on the islands]. A hundred years ago they had plantations. They were owned by white masters. ... [African-Americans] lived ... outside the plantation. ...What do we have now? We have a plantation, that's run by people who've moved to the community who want the same kind of services. We have buses that transport people from outlying areas off the plantation to come and do the plantation work.
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> ...without ... [certain]...modifications, the ecological and economic impact of tourism and development along South Carolina's coast will exacerbate class and racial divisions, further erode the social fabric of the islands, increase the psychological frustration and despair of the lower middle class, and commodify existing cultural traditions. On the other hand, with prudent and immediate actions to eliminate the expanding culture of servitude, the pleasurable quality of life in this beautiful part of the United States will continue.'

Development of gated communities has rendered some sacred sites and cemeteries inaccessible. Not only do some Gullah/Geechee people feel choked out of their communities, but in some respects, they view resort development as virtual reincarnation of the plantation system. Some of these people expressed their frustration to the SRS research team. With only minimum wage jobs available, they feel subservient once again to their resort "masters." Many of these exclusive communities have even used the word plantation as part of their names. (Pinskey 1982, 1993)

Hargrove (2000) in her review of scholarly writing has described the inexorable confluence of external pressures for change on one Gullah community. She concludes

with a hopeful note that this NPS Special Resource Study could itself serve as a catalyst for reconstituting Gullah social vitality. It is, indeed, the conundrum of this SRS that the study itself has become intertwined with the very cultural resource that it purports to study, i.e., contemporary Gullah/Geechee culture. The SRS has become one of a suite of ongoing activities that Gullah/Geechee people and communities seek to turn to their advantage in order to "save our culture."

The very existence of all these Gullah/Geechee efforts at cultural preservation and revitalization could be seen as evidence in themselves of the precariousness of Gullah/Geechee survival. Even so, the fact remains that the survival of a recognizable, distinct Gullah/Geechee culture is questionable. Indeed, Gullah/Geechee people of Georgia are included in a recent scholarly work entitled Endangered Peoples of North America: Struggles to Survive and Thrive (Greaves 2002). As William Pollitzer so bluntly yet hopefully wrote, (1999)

> The sea islanders of today are threatened by the ever-increasing pace of modern life with its economic demands. They are not a museum piece, relics of the past, but rather survivors of enslavement, bondage, discrimination, and white privilege – fellow human beings entitled to work out their own destiny. Hopefully the best of sea island life, language, customs, and values can be preserved, even as the people take advantage of new opportunities and move into mainstream America. The Gullah people can cherish individual differences and take pride in a unique heritage …. The Sea Islands will then become more than the "see islands" for tourists; … and the Low Country will become the High Country of the African American experience.